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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN

Refs: A. State 157575; B. Hanoi 2267; C. HCMC 1009; D. HCMC 1024

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) The Ambassador met September 29 with Committee on Religious Affairs Chairman Ngo Yen Thi to present Ref A points (previously provided to Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang) and discuss the religious freedom situation in Vietnam. Although there has been great progress, problems remain, and we are concerned about recent incidents, such as a church burning in Quang Ngai Province, illegal seizures of land belonging to Hmong Protestants in the Northwest Highlands and problems involving a foreigners' church group in HCMC, the Ambassador explained. Chairman Thi showed a positive attitude to responding to these specific cases and readily acknowledged that local authorities often do not follow Vietnam's laws and regulations. He cited Gia Lai Province in the Central Highlands as a model for other localities there. The Chairman also explained that there will be forward movement in the church registration and recognition processes towards the end of the year or early next year. End Summary.

Much Progress...

12. (SBU) The Ambassador met September 29 with Ngo Yen Thi, Chairman of the GVN's Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA). Pol/C also attended. Drawing on points contained in Refs A and B, the Ambassador outlined the many areas in the bilateral relationship that have improved in the decade since normalization, not least our bilateral discussions on religious freedom. Thanks to the efforts of the CRA, this past year in particular has seen important progress, with the GVN going to considerable lengths to clarify its religion policies and expand the space for religious belief. This progress, and our bilateral efforts that culminated in the May 5 exchange of letters, helped to set the stage for Prime Minister Phan Van Khai's successful visit to Washington and meeting with President Bush, at which the President described the exchange of letters as a "landmark agreement." The USG fully recognizes that the space for religious belief and practice is expanding in Vietnam, the Ambassador emphasized.

...But Problems Remain

13. (SBU) That said, several positive legal reforms remain in their initial stages and a number of significant problems are of concern to the United States, the Ambassador continued. One key problem area is that local authorities are still not consistently implementing Vietnam's legal framework on religion. Although a formal decision has not yet been made, under these conditions, it will be difficult to lift Vietnam's designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for religious freedom violations. As indicated to Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang (Ref B), one way for both sides to narrow their differences and identify areas of agreement is for the GVN to provide in six months' time a province-by-province assessment of the state of religious freedom, the Ambassador explained.

General Areas of Concern

14. (SBU) Providing Ref A's list problem areas (in Vietnamese) to Chairman Thi, the Ambassador paraphrased our general concerns:

-- 1) A number of individuals remain in prison because of their religious activities. Although our list continues to shrink, thanks both to amnesties and the solid information we received from the GVN that some of our prisoners of concern were not in jail for religious reasons, we still know of two individuals who are in prison for reasons connected to their faith (see para 15 for the list provided to Chairman Thi);

-- 2) Better training and supervision of local officials are necessary to ensure consistent implementation of Vietnam's legal framework on religion;

-- 3) We continue to receive reports -- although fewer than before -- about forced renunciations and physical assaults on believers. These attract a great deal of attention in the United States and elsewhere;

-- 4) Providing opportunities for religious training is key because well-trained religious workers can help to ensure that believers and their practices are accepted in their communities;

-- 5) and, the legalization of congregations and re-establishment of house churches are critical issues, but this is still a disappointing area, and the pace of church reopenings is slow.

Recent Problem Areas

15. (SBU) Turning to specific examples of recent problem areas, the Ambassador expressed surprise about reports that Chairman Thi's Committee plans to turn down the registration applications of the Mennonite and 7th Day Adventist churches. If true, this would be disappointing and difficult to understand. The Ambassador noted that we are also aware that, on August 21, a house church in Quang Ngai Province was burned down by a local veterans group after the religious followers refused to renounce their faith (Ref C). Our ConGen HCMC has raised this issue with local authorities, but has not yet received a response, the Ambassador said.

16. (SBU) Another incident that has come to our attention involves a number of Hmong Protestants in Lao Cai Province, in the northwest, who reportedly had their land illegally seized because of their religious beliefs, the Ambassador continued. We sent a letter to the Lao Cai People's Committee Chairman asking about this matter, with a copy to the CRA's Chairman Thi. We recognize that tensions will exist at the village level between believers and non-believers, and this can be difficult to manage. But, Vietnamese law is clear, and people have the freedom either to believe or not to believe, and each should not interfere with the other. Finally, we are concerned about the inability of a major Protestant church group for foreigners in HCMC to meet in a local hotel for Sunday services (Ref D). Our ConGen has also raised this issue with HCMC authorities, and we hope that the CRA will be able to solve this before it becomes an even bigger problem, the Ambassador stressed.

17. (SBU) Thanking the Ambassador for his thoughts and his praise for the CRA, Chairman Thi noted that his Committee has to take care not to "stand out too much," as doing so can sometimes make it difficult to implement GVN legal documents and directives. The CRA sees its function as to provide advice to Vietnam's leaders and to serve as an intermediary between the GVN and religious groups. For the CRA, the two key issues are the promulgation of new laws and regulations and, subsequently, figuring out how to breathe life into them. In paying attention to these issues, the CRA has had a particular focus on Protestants in the Central Highlands. There is now a training course for local officials (down to the district level) so that they understand the Prime Minister's Instruction on Protestantism and what steps need to be taken vis-a-vis Protestants. The CRA also requires local authorities that are "doing well" to draft "model reports" for others to follow, Chairman Thi explained.

18. (SBU) Over the past several months, there has been much progress in the Central Highlands, with Gia Lai Province doing a particularly good job, the Chairman continued. Gia Lai authorities are implementing the Prime Minister's Instruction, and ten more Protestant congregations have registered there. Gia Lai has also permitted the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) to conduct a training course for 46 pastors. Elsewhere in the Central Highlands, such as in Dak Lak, Dak Nong, Kon Tum and Lam Dong Provinces, there has also been progress, Chairman Thi said. However, improvements in the various provinces are unequal because of "different levels of awareness among local officials." For its part, the CRA needs to understand why some local authorities do not fully understand GVN policy, such as the Prime Minister's Instruction. To that end, the CRA is monitoring the situation in the Central Highlands, providing guidance and direction to local authorities and preparing to enact "further steps" for even further improvements on the ground, Chairman Thi explained.

19. (SBU) The CRA is also focusing its efforts on the Ordinance on Religion and Belief (and its Implementing Decree) to facilitate the registration of and religious practice by certain groups, Thi continued. "Hopefully later

this year or early next year there will be more improvements to allow religious groups to register their activities," he said. Although unregistered groups are carrying out their activities "as normal," it is important for them to receive recognition from the Central Government so that local authorities recognize that these groups are acting within the law. Because of a lack of recognition, religious groups' activities are often misunderstood as illegal, and local authorities have taken action to prevent them. Therefore, the key is to speed up the registration/recognition process with the hope that there will be further improvements in the days ahead.

10. (SBU) Incidents of forced renunciations have declined considerably, but there is often still "disharmony" between believers and non-believers or local authorities, the Chairman acknowledged. However, there are some cases that on the surface appear to involve discrimination or forced renunciations, but, in fact, are family feuds. On the specific issue of the land issue in Lao Cai Province, Chairman Thi acknowledged receipt of the copy of the Ambassador's letter and said that he sent CRA officers to the area to investigate and report.

11. (SBU) On the subject of the foreigners' religious group in HCMC (the New Life Fellowship), Chairman Thi said that he sent written instructions to the HCMC CRA to provide guidance to the group on how to register their religious activities. Hotels are not religious places, and if the group wants to use a Vietnamese place of worship, it only needs to register with the proper authorities. This kind of case seems unusual for HCMC, which is normally more "flexible," and Chairman Thi surmised that it may just involve some procedural problem. On the Quang Ngai church-burning case, Chairman Thi said this was the first he heard of it and pledged to investigate.

12. (SBU) The religious situation in Vietnam continues to improve, Chairman Thi averred. However, while we have to recognize that there will be problems, we cannot let individual incidents color our overall perception of the situation. The Chairman concluded by promising to continue to work with the Ambassador and the Embassy to further promote progress.

13. (SBU) The Ambassador agreed that breathing life into Vietnam's laws and regulations is a key challenge, and that, while there has been progress, challenges remain, particularly in the registration and recognition process. Incidents will occur, but information sharing can help to ameliorate this, and the Ambassador promised to continue to keep Chairman Thi informed of incidents and problems that come to our attention. Gia Lai Province is indeed a model for others, and we hope that the GVN and the CRA can convince Dak Lak Province and others to pay attention to how Gia Lai handles issues related to religious freedom. Thanking the Chairman for the information on the New Life Fellowship, the Ambassador noted that, although HCMC may seem to be more flexible on certain matters, other problems in the past, notably involving the Mennonites and Pastor Quang, show that sometimes even the most progressive local authorities need help to get back on the right path.

14. (SBU) Comment: Chairman Thi showed a refreshing willingness to acknowledge shortfalls in some areas, particularly the gaps between the Central Government and local authorities and the slowness of the registration process. Moreover, we are in full agreement with his assessment of Gia Lai Province as an oasis of progressiveness in the Central Highlands. We will continue to work with Chairman Thi and his CRA to share information and bring problem areas to their attention. End Comment.

15. (SBU) List of prisoners provided to Chairman Thi of Vietnamese citizens who are imprisoned for reasons related to their religious views.

Begin list:

Tran Van Hoang: Hoa Thoi Village, Dinh Thanh Commune, Thoai Son District, An Giang Province. Forty-seven-year-old Hoa Hao Buddhist, detained on February 25, 2005, and sentenced to nine months' imprisonment for distributing audio cassettes and DVDs with religious teachings on them.

Ma Van Bay: Ha Giang Province. A Protestant church leader, Bay was allegedly arrested in 1997 and charged with theft after collecting voluntary donations for church use. Bay escaped from custody and lived for several years in Binh Phuoc Province. In November 2003, he was allegedly arrested again and returned to Ha Giang and sentenced to six years' imprisonment on April 28, 2004.

End list.

MARINE